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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 001311

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PTER](#) [ASEC](#) [KDEM](#) [TH](#)  
SUBJECT: RAMKHAMHAENG RECTOR ON SECURITY AND POLITICAL CONCERNS

REF: A. BANGKOK 1249 (CHATURON AT FCCT)  
[1](#)B. BANGKOK 1081 (BOMB CASE STALLED)

Classified By: Political Counselor Susan Sutton, reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

#### SUMMARY

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[1](#)1. (C) The Acting Rector of Ramkhamhaeng University told us he saw no grounds for RTG officials' public concerns that some of his students might be tied to southern militant activity. In a February 28, Political Science Faculty Dean Wutisak Lapcharoensap told us he had provided information on his students to the authorities and volunteered to assist with further surveillance at the University, although the RTG had not taken him up on this offer. Wutisak told us his greatest concern was efforts of deposed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party to manipulate campus organizations. Some students had begun agitating for the defeat of the constitution in the upcoming referendum. End Summary.

#### BACKGROUND

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[1](#)2. (SBU) Ramkhamhaeng University (RU) currently has approximately 600,000 students formally enrolled and approximately 30,000 to 40,000 actively taking courses, according to the Acting Rector, Wutisak Lapcharoensap. Founded in 1971 in response to a national shortage of university slots, RU is Thailand's first open-admission university (anyone with a high school diploma is entitled to enroll). Students at RU have a history of political activism; for example at the height of May 1992 protests against the government of General Suchinda, RU became a rallying point for fifty thousand protesters.

[1](#)3. (SBU) The Thai press recently published articles suggesting a southern student group at Ramkhamhaeng could be involved in the New Year's Eve bombing attacks. Defense Minister General Boonrawd told reporters, "We cannot control them as they exploit the liberty of students to move freely about Bangkok." (Note: Because RU has an open admission policy, a disproportionate number of Muslim students from southern Thailand are enrolled there, rather than at more elite state universities in Bangkok. End Note.) A Ramkhamhaeng student originally from Yala, Thawansak Paenae, was publicly identified as a person of interest in the bombings after being spotted on closed circuit TV at one of the targeted sites on December 31. Thawansak is wanted by

the police for involvement in the bombing of Yala banks in August 2006; his current whereabouts are unknown. Police now question whether Thawansak is really the person shown in the video.

#### SOUTHERN STUDENTS

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14. (C) As suspicion of an RU link to the bombings arose, observers' attention turned to PNYS, a 1,700-strong organization of students from the four southern provinces of Pattani, Narathiwat, Yala, and Satun (the first three of which are the focus of southern militant activity). When we raised public reports of concern about PNYS activities, Wutisak told us that the organization, like most others at RU, appealed to students based on their province of origin. He said he understood PNYS to be focused primarily on social activities rather than politics; he noted PNYS had stayed neutral in recent student elections. He also observed that a majority of PNYS members were women.

15. (C) Wutisak told us he had read through the file of Thawansak, the suspect in the New Year's Eve bombings. Wutisak said he checked out as a good student and had never participated in any PNYS student activities. Despite speculation surrounding Thawansak, Wutisak emphasized that Thawansak has not been charged with a crime, and he did not see a need to be concerned.

16. (C) When we asked whether Wutisak was concerned by the authorities' focus on RU, he indicated he personally had a good relationship with the Council for National Security (CNS), noting that two days after the September coup, he had

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been appointed by the coup council as a member of one of the council's advisory committees. (Unlike some other appointees who were appointed without prior consultation, Wutisak told us he had been called by General Winai Phattiyakul, currently the CNS Secretary General.) Wutisak said he had spoken at least twice with General Saprang Kalayanamitr, who indicated the government was not hostile toward the university. Wutisak told us he had provided names of PNYS members to the authorities and assured full cooperation. He had volunteered to assist the government with prospective surveillance activities, but Witthisak said no one contacted him to follow up on that offer -- although he acknowledged that the government might have begun conducting surveillance without consulting RU's management.

#### THAI RAK THAI

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17. (C) Rather than dwelling on PNYS, though, Wutisak told us he was more concerned that the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) Party of deposed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was intervening in campus activities and trying to mobilize students around its agenda. He cited the recent merger of two student parties -- Sattha Tham and Phithak Tham -- claiming that a former TRT former legislator and deputy spokesman, Chatuphon Phromphan (also a Ramkhamhaeng alumnus), had provided three million Baht (approximately 85,000 USD) to engineer the merger. Wutisak said that Sattha Tham's ability to pay for an unusually expensive stage, as well as an overly professional production of posters and flyers, also indicated external support for the student party. Perhaps because of TRT's influence, some students at RU had already begun agitating for the defeat of the draft constitution in the upcoming referendum. Wutisak said he had provided information on TRT's meddling in campus affairs to the CNS.

18. (C) Not all academic activism reflected external manipulation, Wutisak noted. He said that some academics -- such as the anti-coup group lead by Chulalongkorn professor Giles Ungpakorn -- seemed to be expressing their sincere views, not acting as tools of the TRT. (RU nevertheless

prohibited Giles' group from entering RU's campus to hold a political event.) Wutisak also explained that students had requested that senior Democrat Party (DP) figures visit the campus to speak, but he viewed this as reflecting genuine student interest (especially as many RU students are from southern Thailand, a stronghold for the DP) rather than DP intervention.

COMMENT

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19. (C) We are not certain that Wutisak has his finger on the pulse of the southern student community, but we do suspect that some of the authorities' suspicion about the RU students is based simply on Bangkok Buddhist prejudice against Muslims from the southern provinces, rather than on evidence that militant cells are active at the University. We also take note of Wutisak's claim that activists presumably sympathetic to TRT are gearing up to oppose the constitution in the referendum, even as TRT's Party Leader claimed publicly that he was disposed to support any decent draft charter, in order to speed a return to normalcy (ref A).

BOYCE